

# Kamala Harris Goes to Guatemala

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Investors are not on board, because they distrust the vice president's agenda.



By Mary O'Grady  
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### **Vice President Kamala Harris, June 3.**

Photo: evelyn hockstein/Reuters

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Vice President [Kamala Harris](#) visits Guatemala on Monday as part of her effort to address the “root causes” of migration from Central America’s Northern Triangle—which also includes El Salvador and Honduras. One of Ms. Harris’s goals is to drum up investment for the region.

Manage your expectations.

Count on lots of glad-handing with politicians, activists from nongovernmental organizations, and slippery businessmen who know a thing or two about political entrepreneurship.

The unseen will matter more. For Guatemala that’s big numbers of small and medium-size investors, foreign and domestic, who are necessary for development but are not on board with Ms. Harris because they distrust her agenda.

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Guatemalan politics are highly charged, polarized and corrupt. One side, with backers in Washington, applauds land invasions, electricity theft and road blocks in the name of social justice. For the antidevelopment left, in Guatemala and in the American Democratic Party, the rule of law in the developing world is a nuisance.

Ms. Harris showed her cards in Washington last month when she met with Guatemala's former Attorney General Thelma Aldana, despite Ms. Aldana's two outstanding Guatemalan arrest warrants on charges of corruption. She has [said](#) on [Twitter](#) that she is a victim of "dark forces."

Former Guatemalan high-court judge Gloria Porras was at the same meeting, though there are scores of legal complaints against her at home for allegedly refusing to obey the constitution. These include complaints from a qualified majority of the association of representatives who drafted the constitution in the mid-1980s. Ms. Porras [claims](#) she was denied a third five-year term by an antidemocratic conspiracy.

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Ms. Harris's show of support for Ms. Aldana and Ms. Porras was political theater. If the U.S. vice president were serious about drawing investment to Guatemala, she would have told them to go home and face justice. Paraphrasing Ms. Aldana from her time as the nation's top prosecutor, if there's nothing to hide, there's nothing to fear.

Perhaps Ms. Aldana and Ms. Porras are worried they'll be treated as the accused often were during their tenures. Ask [the Bitkov family](#) or [Max Quirin](#), both victimized by abuses of power on the part of the attorney general and the high-court judge.

Investors know the runaway miscarriage of justice by Guatemalan judges and prosecutors occurred under Iván Velásquez, the Colombian leftist who in October 2013 took over as head of the U.N.'s International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG. Mr. Velásquez [weaponized](#) CICIG for political ends, using "preventive detention" as a tool to terrorize Guatemalan society and silence the left's political opposition.

The way to stay out of Mr. Velásquez's line of fire was to line up behind him. A lazy and corrupt press played the role of Madame Defarge. The commissioner won accolades when he jailed President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti for an alleged customs crime

ring. Yet CICIG still hadn't secured convictions in that case when, in 2019, its mandate wasn't renewed. CICIG left the country, a failed experiment in institution building due in no small part to Mr. Velásquez's political zeal.

Ms. Harris's meeting with Ms. Aldana and Ms. Porras indicates where the Biden administration wants to steer Guatemala. Equally worrying is the decision by President Biden to nominate Todd Robinson, former U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, to head the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The office of "drugs and thugs," as the portfolio is sometimes called, is active in Central America. Mr. Robinson's record raises serious questions about his suitability for the job.

Undoubtedly, he passes the Democrats' ideological litmus test. During his time at the embassy he earned a reputation for meddling in domestic politics in ways that went well beyond the scope of his responsibility. He was known, for example, for pressuring Guatemala's Congress to confirm judges aligned with his political views. The State Department told me he was not available for comment.

Judging from Mr. Robinson's many public appearances with the pro-CICIG Ms. Aldana, the two were close and he supported her, even while she was making decisions that risked U.S. national security. In 2014 and 2015, insiders at Guatemala's National Registry of Persons and at the attorney general's office presented evidence to Ms. Aldana suggesting that permanent residency cards were fraudulently issued for people from places like Kazakhstan, Russia, China, Iran, Libya and Syria. Such cards can be used to secure Guatemalan citizenship, which can then be used to apply for U.S. visas. As [I reported](#) in December 2018, rather than investigate the person who signed those documents, Ms. Aldana promoted her to deputy attorney general.

The Senate should ask Mr. Robinson whether he knew about Ms. Aldana's decisions and, if not, why not. Among those who deserve answers are the investors Ms. Harris is courting for Guatemala.

*Write to O'Grady@wsj.com.*

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### **About this article**

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“The Americas” column is commentary on political, economic, financial and social developments in the Western Hemisphere outside the English-speaking U.S.



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Mary Anastasia O'Grady writes "The Americas," a weekly column on politics, economics and business in Latin America and Canada that appears every Monday in the Journal. Ms. O'Grady joined the paper in August 1995 and became a senior editorial page writer in December 1999. She was appointed an editorial board member in November 2005. She is also a member of the board of directors of the Indianapolis-based Liberty Fund.

In 2012 Ms. O'Grady won the Walter Judd Freedom Award from The Fund for American Studies. In 2009 Ms. O'Grady received the Thomas Jefferson Award from The Association of Private Enterprise Education. In 2005 Ms. O'Grady won the Bastiat Prize for Journalism awarded by the International Policy Network for her articles on the World Bank, the underground economy in Brazil and the bad economic advice the U.S. often gives to Latin American countries. In 1997 Ms. O'Grady won the Inter American Press Association's Daily Gleaner Award for editorial commentary.

Ms. O'Grady received a bachelor's degree in English from Assumption College and an M.B.A. in financial management from Pace University.